

ARDITTI QUARTET

String Quartet

New York Times, December 4, 2009
 Music Review: Arditti Quartet

Last-Minute Changes Lead to Sudden Sounds

By ALLAN KOZINN

It seemed like a fantastic idea: the Hilliard Ensemble, best known for its performances of early sacred works (with occasional forays into the more mystical corners of new music) was to have joined forces with the Arditti Quartet, a group that specializes in the thornier end of the modern repertory, at Zankel Hall on Wednesday evening.

The project that was to unite them was Wolfgang Rihm's "Et Lux," and reports from London, where the two groups performed the piece last week, suggested that Mr. Rihm had found ways to move the ensembles in and out of each other's comfort zones.

But when the Arditti players turned up for a rehearsal on Wednesday morning, they learned that one of the Hilliard singers was ill, and that performing the Rihm was out of the question. Instead of canceling the concert outright, the violinist Irvine Arditti and his colleagues — Ashot Sarkissjan, violinist; Ralf Ehlers, violist; and Lucas Fels, cellist — pulled together a short but vigorous string quartet program that even offered the audience the compensation of another Rihm score, the Quartet No. 12 (2001).

Mr. Rihm's quartet begins with a whisper and ends with a whimper, but in between, it trades in explosive pizzicato bursts, vehement counterpoint and fast-bowed sections that produce an insectlike buzz. Mr. Rihm rarely asks his instruments to blend; instead, he has each change its timbre and articulation style continuously, and never has two instruments producing the same kind of sound. In one section, for example, a rubbery first violin line is set beside a shrill second violin, a harshly bowed viola and a snapping pizzicato in the cello.

Pascal Dusapin's String Quartet No. 5 (2005) was inspired by the abstruse discussion between the title characters in Samuel Beckett's "Mercier and Camier." But it's hard to hear it that way. In the work's opening and closing sections, the first violin has a slowly unfolding, mildly angular line, which Mr. Arditti played with glowing vibrato and alluring warmth. The other three musicians play a rhythmically complex pizzicato texture that morphs gradually into a murky, bowed chord progression. This hardly seems a conversation, with the solo violin and rest of the quartet functioning on different planes and taking no notice of each other. In the middle of the work, where lines move more briskly, the imagery is that of a scampering chase, not a colloquy.

The Arditti players closed the concert with Harrison Birtwistle's "Tree of Strings" (2007), a piece that uses many of the same techniques heard in the Rihm and Dusapin scores: pizzicato figures, harsh attacks, sudden fortissimos, singing solo lines. But Mr. Birtwistle uses these sounds descriptively: the piece is a vivid portrait of the Scottish Isle of Raasay, where he lived in the 1970s.

These musicians are entirely at home in this music. You would hardly have known that only a few hours earlier, they had no idea they would be playing it.

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Robert Everett-Green
Toronto Globe and Mail, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

Arditti Quartet with Louise Bessette
At Jane Mallett Theatre in Toronto on Thursday

The Arditti Quartet is the gold standard of contemporary chamber-music ensembles. I doubt that any current group has brought more new works into the world, many of exceptional quality. No one plays contemporary repertoire with more passion and skill. As you can tell, I'm a fan, though I haven't had a chance to show my love since the Arditti played a previous Music Toronto recital in 2002.

This time, the quartet brought us a new piece by one of our own: Montreal composer Serge Arcuri, whose *Le Tumulte des flots: Quintet for string quartet and piano* (2008) got its first-ever performance at Thursday's concert. Much of this four-movement work dwells in a region where chords are not so much moves in a harmonic chess game as ways of teasing out the colours hiding within familiar instruments. The opening movement was particularly filled with magical resonances, achieved by artful voicings, crafty piano peddling (by the nimble Montreal pianist Louise Bessette) and luminous chord chains that sometimes climbed toward the heavens. Arcuri owes a debt to Olivier Messiaen, as he acknowledged in remarks from the stage, but the range of colours and the processive feeling of the piece (some of which felt like a structured improvisation) were all his own.

Pascal Dusapin's *String Quartet No. 5* (2005) coursed through several changes of mood and tempo during its imaginary discourse with characters from Samuel Beckett, sometimes slashing the strings in argument, sometimes pacing through a long-breathed threnody, always seeming to engage us in a colloquy of heated intensity. The most striking bit was a minute or two of soft rapid tutti playing near the bridge, which came across like a whispered yet feverish discussion we were somehow able to overhear.

Harrison Birtwistle's *The Tree of Strings* (2007) showed an English master sounding completely at ease with his materials, unafraid to repeat some little rhythmic gizmo for as long as he wanted to hear it, clear in his thoughts and not at all set in his ways. For all his skill, I've never thought of Birtwistle as a particularly congenial composer, but in sections of this piece I felt as if he were speaking to me in a language that was mine, though I had somehow not encountered it before. A rare and unexpected experience. The serial departures of the four excellent players (violinists Irvine Arditti and Ashot Sarkissjan, violist Ralf Ehlers and cellist Lucas Fels), first to an outer row of chairs and then off the stage, felt both like an exile and a return to a wider, less intensely focused plane of existence. Come back please, and soon.

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All About Jazz.com, December 23, 2009
By Martin Longley

Uri Caine/The Arditti Quartet

(le) Poisson Rouge, December 1, 2009

...For this gig, it's fellow New Yorker Uri Caine who's unveiling a new work, penned for the Arditti Quartet. But not before this long-established (1974) British string group gave it's own early-evening recital of pieces by Harrison Birtwistle ("The Tree Of Strings"), Conlon Nancarrow ("Quartet No. 3") and Iannis Xenakis ("Tetras"). Usually, the Ardittis leaven their modernism with a stray ancient work, but these three composers had been chosen for their similar sense of intensely resonant friction. Instead of conveying a diverse set of contrasts, the Ardittis had elected to lock the audience into a dramatic, sometimes harsh world of riffing cello, slippery violin or viola streaks and radical changes in speed, space, texture, rhythm and attack.

All virtual-vending had been suspended for this first half (even the milk'n'cookies), the quartet limned under static light, foregoing the club's distinctive shadow-shifting visuals. They were subtly amplified, but with no trace of unintentional distortion or hiss. Purity triumphed. Doubtless at the request of the Ardittis, all unnecessary distractions were banished, so that the gathering could completely drown in such a masterful depth of expression.

An alternative space can often have a beneficial effect. Unlike most classical temples, the Poisson hadn't provided programs, so the audience had to guess, initially, which pieces were being played. As soon as leader and founder Irvine Arditti discovered this, he elected to communicate directly, in a surprisingly humorous vein. This helped to flesh out the musical background in a more memorable and personal manner.

Your scribe was seated at a frontal table for this first set, completely surrounded by sound. For the second half, he removed himself to the rear wall, and this might have had an effect on his lessened appreciation of the sonics of Uri Caine's new Caprices For String Quartet And Piano. By comparison, these sounded smoother, suffering as they followed the more aggressive sound-worlds of Birtwistle, Nancarrow and Xenakis.

The Ardittis and Caine performed with the expected technical dash, but each short movement felt like an exercise in gratuitous string-flowing, accompanied by dappled piano colorations. Caine frequently lurked in the background, where surely he should have been an equal, or even an upfront focus of attention. There were a scattering of solo piano flourishes, where Caine's cascading force elicited smiles from the Ardittis, but generally this was too lacking in personalized angularity.

Perhaps this was just the expectation arising out of Caine's accustomed tactic of radical re-structuring. Where the second set might have been expected to transcend the first, this was noticeably not the case.

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"It was a great, yes sensational concert evening which set new standards. The Ardittis performed at a dizzyingly top class level. The way they interpreted the music... took one's breath away more than once."

— Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, July 2008

"The Arditti's performance seemed to me to have everything: pin-point precision was married to great depth of expression. Every note counted, as it must, both in itself and in terms of its relationship to every note around it..."

— Seen and Heard, October 2007, Mark Berry

"The Arditti played the six little pieces of Kurtag's *Moments Musicaux* with fabulous concentration, making every silence speak volumes, but then their command of every challenge this programme threw at them was astonishing."

— The Guardian (London), January 2007

"They are the Rolls-Royce of quartets..."

— Strings, October 2004, Inge Kemtrup

"The Arditti Quartet stole the show with their closing concert. In a stunning programme of Nancarrow, Kurtag, Carter and Ligeti, they fused superlative technique with spellbinding musicianship, at its most moving in the ending of Kurtag's *Officium Breve*."

— The Guardian, January 2004, Pauline Fairclough

"Finally, it was the turn of the Arditti Quartet to showcase quartets of our time and to take the breath away with their trademark fearlessness and precision..."

— The Daily Telegraph (London), January 2004, David Fanning

"It is impossible to overstate the impact of the Arditti Quartet on the development of contemporary chamber music."

— The Guardian, June 2002

"As it has done for more than a quarter-century with astonishing virtuosity and bravery, the Arditti Quartet continues to treat music as something of crucial importance and endless amazement."

— Los Angeles Times, May 2001

"The Arditti are a national treasure, the best in the world at what they do..."

— The Guardian, April 2001, Andrew Clements

"What is so extraordinary about the playing of the Ardittis is its technical mastery, allied with a profound understanding of how the music is built up. Their Carter recordings are one of the finest contemporary-music achievements on disc..."

— The Guardian, June 2000, Andrew Clements

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